

The Hightstown Rug Mill

By Cappy Stults



The Rug Mill in the 1920's Memories From My Youth

When I was young (1950s and 1960s), nearly every Hightstown-East Windsor area resident had a family member that either worked at or had worked at the Hightstown Smyrna Rug Factory, aka Hightstown Rug Co and more commonly known as, "The Ruggie." My memories about it are likely clearer than most because my maternal grandfather, Clarence Puglin, was a manager there and a cousin to the Davison family that owned and operated the company for years. Additionally, I used to spend some overnights at my Great Aunt Ella Stults Ely's house (C. Allen Ely's wife) at 176 Stockton Street. The factory was across a small creek in their backyard. I would hear the loud work whistle blow at eight a.m. every morning, maybe earlier, I can't recall. All I know is that it was a steam whistle and was very loud. In later years it was replaced by an electric klaxon horn. I preferred the steam whistle as did all of the neighbors.

Why I'm Writing This Article Now

I decided to write this article now because after many years of vacancy and changes in ownership, it appears

that the site will be redeveloped beginning in late 2019, early 2020. The developer plans to raze the blue and white metal buildings on North Academy Street and build townhouses in their place. The original brick factory and office building will be converted to upscale apartments. The project will also include the old municipal complex which has not been occupied since hurricane Irene in 2011. There are plans for the rest of the property as well. The owner also purchased the old Esther Schenck Hoyt house, the large yellow house on the corner of Bank Street and North Academy Street. I believe this was her parent's house. She was a longtime librarian in the Hightstown Library. Mrs. Hoyt sold it to the Willis family after she retired and moved to Florida in 1973.

How The Rug Mill Came To Be

Now for some history of the Hightstown Smyrna Rug Company. Hightstown was an agricultural town from its earliest years to the mid-1800s: the railroad era. Once the Camden & Amboy railroad came through in the 1830s and even more so after the Hightstown-Pemberton railroad (the U.T.) in the 1860s, Hightstown became a center of commerce. Stores, (cont. pg 3)



Dear Members and Friends,

It has been another busy and successful year for your Society. Our membership returns were better than 2018 and we have added a number of members and life members. THANK YOU ALL.

Bob Craig and I have met with a couple of history classes at Hightstown High School. The students are doing "project based learning" meaning they chose a subject from an era, do research and then do interviews. Members Bill Kendall and Abi Stults Rivenburgh and Debbie Corrington agreed to be interviewed for their projects.

The Hightstown newspaper digitization project done in conjunction with the Hightstown Library is completed. Much thanks to Curtis Crowell for putting this together and doing all of the leg work. If you haven't already try it out at www.digifind-it.com/ Hightstown/gazette.php

The Downtown Hightstown group requested that we do walking tours of downtown this year. The first was held in May and about fourteen people started at the Ely House, walked through the town and ended at Allen & Stults Co., where there are a number of historical displays. Yours truly led the tour and answered many questions. There will be 2-3 more this year.

Greg Ciano continues to awe us with his theatrical/music productions performed by local children. The participation was better than last year and over 100 attended the production held at the Masonic Lodge on North Main Street on May 18th. He is already working on next year's production. It can also be found on Youtube. Check our Facebook page for a link to the video.

And finally, the annual meeting was held in Roosevelt. Sixty members and guests attended and viewed the Shahn mural in the school, the Roosevelt bust in the park and walked to the synagogue for a film on the town's unique Bauhaus architecture and a great meal. Thank you all who attended.



tique roadshow on October 24, 2019, at 5 pm. Hope to see many of you there, if not before. Be sure to check our Calendar of Events in this issue for upcoming events happening, and if you're on Facebook, like and follow us (if you haven't already) to stay up-to-date on all things Historical Society.

Cappy Stults, President

Besides the walking tour, in Fall we will be having another an-

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Hightstown Walking Tour	July 27 6 - 7pm
Hightstown Walking Tour	August 17 6 - 7pm
September Monthly Meeting	September 9 7 - 8pm
Video Game Tournament Fundraiser	September 28 12 - 5pm
October Monthly Meeting	October 7 7 - 8pm
Antique Road Show	October 24 7 - 8pm
Christmas Tea	December 8 1:30 - 3pm

HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Rug Mill - Continued

order, taking over many other small businesses in town.

hotels, taverns, blacksmiths, carriage makers, doctors, lawyers, and some small manufacturers were located here. But in the 1890s, many of the local merchants

Mr. Davison was familiar with a man named Joseph Cooke, an Englishman who had established a rug factory in a small town outside of Vineland, NJ. He was having trouble finding adequate staffing in that small town and had difficulty raising capital.



Original Factory on Bank Street after the Ward & Mercer Move

became concerned that Hightstown had no industry. There was a shirt company and a shoe company, as well as various milliners (hat makers) and dressmakers, but these were for mostly local purchase. No real production for the larger world. The local business people prosper when the residents make more money so the local businessmen began a search for a manufacturer to move to Hightstown. They raised money to put ads in New York and Philadelphia area newspapers.

Joseph V. Davison To The Rescue

In 1898, one of the most successful businesses was the Corner Brick Store on the corner of Stockton and Main Streets, owned and operated by Joseph V. Davison. Mr. Davison had moved to Hightstown with his family in 1886 and had soon become active in local commerce issues. He must have been very respected because he was made Secretary of The Board of Trade not many years after coming to town. His store was mostly dry goods but later he expanded into produce and larger items by

Sometime in April 1898, Mr. Davison enticed Mr. Cooke to visit Hightstown and meet with the Factory Committee of the Board of Trade. Subsequent to this meeting it was publicly reported in the May 5, 1898 issue of the *Hightstown Gazette*, "The Factory committee reports that Smyrna rug factory prospects are bright. Joseph

Cooke of Vineland, proposes to bring his factory here and it is believed the arrangements can be made. He asks free rent for five years and wants Hightstown to take \$4,000 worth of stock. His factory is now in Janvier and employs 30 hands." By July 14th it was reported that the Hightstown Smyrna Rug Company will be incorporated in a few days. The equipment was on its way to Hightstown and many Smyrna Company employees from Vineland were seen in town looking for houses.

Expansion Happens and Happens Fast

By the beginning of 1899, it was reported that the Rug Company had more orders than it could fill. It had taken over space previously occupied by a sash and blind factory. A local man, William T. Smock, was the company's first president but he soon was re-



J.V. Davison Corner Brick Store - Corner of North Main & Stockton

placed by one of Cooke's men, Frank C. Moody. Late in 1899, the rug company took over the planing mill (lumber finishing mill) on the corner of Ward and Mercer Streets. The company soon occupied six buildings in this location and employed over a hundred people. Things were moving fast and furious by 1900.

But in 1901 there began some bickering between the townspeople and the factory owner. Landlords and merchants had begun raising rents and prices; reaction to the limited supply and prospering town. Others began to build houses for sale or tenancy on speculation. A rumor started to spread that the Cookes were going to move the factory out of town due to the increasing costs. One such rumor was in a Letter to the Editor on January 31, 1901, from councilman Samuel Fryer (Fryer was the owner of what is now Duryea Memorials on Mercer Street and he was the father of the man who would become the town's only Medal of Honor winner, Eli Thompson Fryer). On February 7, 1901, Joseph Cooke vociferously denied the allegations, but Cooke acknowledged that the town was in need of a greater population of able workers many of which needed to move to Hightstown from the city and they also needed affordable housing. He said that in time, rents will naturally increase but there needs to be patience. Cooke wrote, "The rug plant is a child, as it were, learning to walk. Do not put impediments in its way; and when it can walk it will bring lasting prosperity to the town. I say to Brother Fryer, let us work together for the good of all concerned."

In July 1901, it was reported that the factory received an order for 1,000 prayer rugs to export to Egypt. In August they took over the Hightstown Shoe Company, in the Mercer Street building now occupied by Stitches-n-Ink (Babcock), and previously by Old Hights Print Shop. At that time the Company has 145 employees, and had signed five-year leases with the town and landlords. Said leases did not expire until 1903. They were staying.

In January 1902, the *Gazette* reports that the Board of Trade was reestablished with many committees. Over thirty were involved, most with names familiar to most of us: Blauvelt, McCreery, Franklin, Skillman, Eldridge, Wear, Hutchinson, Allen, Wilbur, Dey, Mason, Chamberlin, Cooke, Kirby, Stults, Measuroll, Forman, Titus, Norton, Scheible, Thorburn, Swetland, Cunningham, Moody, Davison, Thomas, Wilson, Rue, Plummer, Applegate, Barr, Robbins and Revs Eaches and Neal on the arbitration committee. The main focus was to work to keep the factory in town and to increase the amount of housing available. Business was still booming.

The Move To Bank Street

In February 1902, it was reported that "over 200 miles of rugs" had been manufactured. They had 129 looms and 166 employ-

ees. Talk began that the company was in need of a new building. In April it was revealed that the company wanted to buy the borough "gravel lot" on Bank Street, west of Rocky Brook. Council approved selling the lot to them for \$25. It had cost the borough \$100 a few years prior. This was clearly a move to keep the factory in town. Its location was perfect due to the need for water for the dye works.

During the week of April 17, 1902, the Board of Trade passed a resolution and formed a committee to determine how to raise or borrow \$10,000, the cost of building the new factory. The interest rate was expected to be 3.5%. J.V. Davison was one of the committee members. The loan would be guaranteed by 30 businesses in town, who would be secured by mortgages and stock in the company. Smyrna was to make annual payments of \$1,000. Concurrently with these actions, Arthur Thompson, a brother of W.H.Thompson and nephew of Joseph Cooke, arrived from England and was employed by the factory. By August 1902, the negotiations, financing and site search were still in process. Five percent return a year was promised to the investors. At the end of the month, the directors of the Building & Loan Association held a special meeting about lending money for the construction of the factory. It was decided to increase the stock offering and Allen & Stults was instructed to secure the subscriptions. They reported that 175 new shares had been subscribed. Individuals loaned \$12,000 for the factory. They were J.V. Davison, Wm. Robbins, D.H. Cunningham, Dr. Titus, Thomas Mason, Wilson Bros, D.B. Dey, E.H Savige, MP Chamberlin, A.T. Skillman, Dr. Franklin, Dr. Wilbur, Allen & Stults, C.C. Blauvelt, J.G Scheible, D.W. Measuroll, R.A. Outcalt, W.F. Dillatush and Samuel Fryer. The Building & Loan would loan the balance. By September the Building & Loan had sold 275 new shares.

Part 2 of "The Highstown Rug Mill" will continue in next month's newsletter. Stay tuned!

Borough Hall to Occupy Old Schoolhouse

By Cappy Stults

For those not abreast of local news, the Borough of Hightstown has purchased the YMCA at 230 Mercer Street to house the borough hall. The previous borough hall was substantially damaged by hurricane Irene in 2011 so the borough has been operating in temporary guarters on the corner of Bank and Mechanic Street ever since the flood. The Society is pleased that this historic building is being saved and we believe it is a suited edifice to be the town hall for a borough such as Hightstown. Those concerned and interested in preservation are excited as well. It is a "one of a kind" building in our area, if not the State. For those concerned about tax ratable property in the Borough, this building has never been on the tax rolls as it was built by the Board of Education, was purchased at a public auction by the Hightstown Masonic Lodge in September 1941, who later sold it to the YMCA in 1978, all tax-exempt ownership. Other old towns, including Cranbury, Bordentown, and others have done the same thing. Now for some history of the site and building.

The Mercer Street structure was originally built in 1894 as a public school essentially replacing the "Academy" which stood not far from this building. But first, before writing about this beautiful brick building, it is worth explaining the history of local schools and particularly of this building's predecessor, the "Academy." Academy Street is the remaining reminder of this school.



Etra Public School



Horse Drawn School Buses in front of The Mercer Street School Other Schools In The Town and Surrounding Area

In the early and mid-19th century, the area had a number of one-room school houses like the Etra School House seen in the picture below.

There were also fee schools located in houses as well as buildings built by church congregations. In 1864 the Presbyterian Church had built Van Rensaller Institute on the east side of North Main Street (a four-story building long gone but the name of the dead-end street still remains). The Baptist Church started a school on Main Street for girls in 1863, but it changed to co-educational the following year and renamed it "The New Jersey Classical and Scientific Institute," the forerunner of Peddie School.

The Academy

But the Academy was the first "public school" and was built in 1841 on Mercer Street. The land was donated by John C. Ward who would later also sell and donate ground for the current Peddie School. Mr. Ward owned most of the south side of the current Hightstown, thus East and West Ward Streets. The Academy



Courtland Van Rensaller Institute 1864-1869



Wilson Hall, Peddie School 1869

building was two stories but only one room per floor. Students educated there had family names of Allen, Applegate, Ashton, Conover, Early, Eldridge, Ely, Ford, Groves, McMichael, Ogborn, Pullen, Shangle, Smith, Smock, Tindall, and Wood. Also Elwood Silvers, this writer's great-great grand uncle, who was killed in Virginia in the Civil War.



Two additional rooms were added in 1859. The April 19, 1866 *Gazette* reported that there was to be a meeting in the Academy to consider how to raise money for the needed repairs to the building. The article listed many issues, both interior and exterior, including "The roof is in a leaky

Carving of the Academy

condition, and with every N.E. storm the inside walls of one end of the building are drenched with water, damaging blackboards and ceilings." The article ended by stating that the total taxable property in the school district was now about \$450,000 and ten cents on every hundred will produce \$450 for the needed repairs.

In 1884, 13 years after the State Legislature established free nine months school for all children, a larger addition was added. Prior to the Legislation and a Constitutional change in 1875, the schools were "partial pay." Some *Village Record* and *Hightstown Gazette* articles reflect a high percentage of absenteeism but education was a priority for the Hightstown-East Windsor citizens. Young boys, in particular, had work duties to perform for the family, thus the absenteeism at times.

The student population increased to the point that in 1894 the Board of Education approved the building of a large, two-story brick building and the Academy was razed. The large bell in the Academy was moved from the Academy tower to the new belfry in the large, brick Mercer Street School. I was recently contacted by Mike Mendenko of Village Nurseries about a bell in his possession. He was not sure of its origin and some thought that it might have been from the Clara Barton School at Cedar Swamp. However, my research of past published materials confirms that it was forged or cast in New York in 1852 and it is indeed the Academy bell.

In the *Village Record* from August 11, 1853 there appears the obituary of a Peter Bilyeu. The obituary states that his life was "one of active usefulness and benevolence and up to the time

of his last illness was more active than most of men many years younger than himself (77)." It continues, "His last act of public benefit was procuring a bell for the Academy in this village, and after his body had been lowered into the grave, this bell commenced tolling, forcibly reminding us that though 'dead he yet speaketh.'" Mr. Bilyeu was born in 1776. Coincidentally, in 1852, the date on the bell, the village residents voted to incorporate the Borough of Hightstown. The NJ Legislature approved same in 1853.

Other articles refer to the purchase of the bell which all but makes it certain that this is the same bell. *Village Record*, December 17, 1852, "Notice – The undersigned takes this method of returning sincere thanks to Peter Bylieu, Senior, Esq., in behalf of the Trustees of School District No. 1, for his untiring exertions in securing a Bell, for the use of the Academy. John Butcher, Trustee."

W. C. Black, prior owner of the Village Nurseries, was active on the school board and was also in the Masons when the Mercer Street School was purchased by the Lodge in 1941. It is logical that he may have moved it to the nursery when the belfry was removed from the Mercer Street School for safekeeping for future use. Gratefully the bell was not sold or discarded.

New Life For The Bell

Our family has purchased the bell and will be donating it to the Society with the condition that it be "on loan" to the Borough and placed in a prominent location inside the "new" borough hall for all to see and enjoy. It will thus be returned to its original site and placed inside of its second home, rather than on the roof and out of sight.

A final word about the Academy. In the *Village Record*, September 10, 1858, an unnamed student wrote a description of the Academy. Excerpts are as follows: "The

Academy is situated about three hundred yards from the prosperous borough of Hightstown. It is on a hill, surrounded on "It is putting it very mildly to say that general satisfaction with the results was expressed and that our tax payers are delighted with the efforts of the board of education, the architect, the



The Academy Bell

the north and east by the village, and on the south and west by a few scattered dwellings and the works of nature. The building is about twenty-five feet from the fence in front, and is two stories high, adorned with a steeple containing a bell whose tinkling sound calls the youth to school." ... "The external appearance far surpasses the internal. On entering the room of the higher department, to which I shall confine myself, my eyes are attracted to the walls; on the left I see maps of the Southern and Eastern States, and on the right a map of Asia, drawn by one who does not understand his profession." More description of the room is, "There are two closets in the room, above the left-hand one stands a clock, and a cigar box (a receptacle for the pen, ink, and trinkets of some absent school boy)." He did not have good things to write about the furniture.

Excerpt From The Gazette

The main subject of this story is the still remaining 1894 Mercer Street School. As reported, in the January 3, 1895, *Hightstown Gazette*, headline, "Our New Public School":

contractor and all others who have helped to bring the building to completion." There were tours and speeches reported but I'll skip to the descriptions. "The building is a handsome brick structure, with stone trimmings and a slate roof. It has a frontage of 72 ½ ft and is 50 ft deep, with a rear projection of 10 ft. 8 in. by 36 ft. There are eight large rooms 27 by 23 ft. with 12 ft ceilings and each connected with separate cloakroom. The two round projections in the front contain two small rooms each, which will be used for a principal's office, etc. Each schoolroom is admirably lighted and provided with simple means of ventilation. Steam heat is used. The entire interior is made up of light oiled wood and rough finished walls, which give the rooms a decidedly cheerful look. Each room is provided with abundant black-boards. On August 14th the sum of \$12,000

was appropriated by the district for this purpose. G.K. Parsell, of New Brunswick, was the architect for the building and the contract was awarded to Daniel Whitlock, of New Brunswick, for \$10,245. Mr. Whitlock and his men did the carpenter work and the mason work was done by William H. Dillon and others. L.W. Grover furnished all of the mill work and C. H. Pembrook has attended to the painting. The heating apparatus was put in by Shangle & Son. In spite of the fact that Architect Parsell's original plans were somewhat altered for sake of economy and a considerable amount of decoration was sacrificed, the building is one



Architects Sketch of The 1894 Mercer Street School

of which he may be proud. It is an ornament to the town and our citizens are to be congratulated on its appearance. As for the most important part, the interior, it is all that can be desired. Wide stairs, ample halls, large cloak-rooms and bright, healthful and spacious school-rooms will make school-going a pleasure to the young folks. Hightstown has every reason to congratulate itself on its new Public School."

This writer recalls the back entrance to the building had two doors on opposite sides of the stairwell. Over one door was a sign "BOYS" and over the other "GIRLS." They used separate entrances!

It operated from 1894 as the first eight grades of public school until 1913, when the upper grades moved to the Stockton Street School (that school no longer exists – it was in front of the Walter C. Black School).

Students wanting four years of high school had to take the train to Trenton High School for the last two years. I have my grandfather's 1912 diploma from Trenton High School. Hightstown families tended to have family or friends in Trenton where students could stay if weather prevented their return train trip to Hightstown at the end of the school day. The last classes were held in the Mercer Street School in 1939. I was always told it was because the State Board of Education had condemned it. It would have been very costly to modernize to 1940s requirements so the Board of Education put the building up for public bid in 1941.

Local lore has it that there were only two parties bidding on Saturday, September 6, 1941, at 2 p.m. The Free & Accepted Masons and the Hightstown House Wrecking Company. The winning bid was \$2,265 after the Wrecking Company pulled out of the process. The story goes that they only wanted it for its brick but when they found out that the other bidding gentlemen were Masons who were going to use it as a Temple, they withdrew from bidding any higher as they too were Masons in another town. The property extends from Mercer Street back to the Greenway and Railroad Avenue and Dawes Park.

It will be nice to see this building put to much more public use, and for the old bell to put on display. Thank you, Mr. Bilyeu.



Christmas Tea

By Shirley Olsen



The Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society will hold its Christmas Tea on Sunday, December 8 from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Ely House. All members and friends of the Society are invited to enjoy cookies, punch and shop at the Holiday Boutique. No ticket is required for this event.

Following the tea The Hightstown Woman's Club and Friday Club are sponsoring a Christmas Candlelight House Tour of several private homes in Hightstown and



East Windsor. The Tour will be from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. rain or shine following the tea. Advance-sale tickets for the tour are \$15 and will be available later this year at Perennial Home, 119 West Ward Street, Hightstown. Day of Event tickets for \$20 can be purchased at The Ely House, 164 North Main Street. Children: \$5. Much of the proceeds from this event will go to the Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society. If you would like to participate in any way for these events, please give Shirley Olsen a call at 609-448-83

Clara Slept Here Live Show

By Gregory Ciano

This year's children theater production, *Clara Slept Here*, was a huge success. Ticket sales were going so well that we added a second show at 3 pm to handle the overspill from our Noon show. We want to give a special thanks to the Hightstown Masonic Lodge for allowing us to rearrange their basement rec room into a makeshift theater.

We'll be holding a Video Game Tournament fundraiser in September at the Masonic Lodge rec room for gamers age 12-18.



The kids did a fantastic job. Some of the actors were as young as 9 years old, but they still impressed with their performance. After seven weeks of rehearsals the day came and they were ready. A link to the video of the performance can be found on our website's homepage.

The cast, as seen in the picture above, is (back row L-R) Sriya Oru, Grace Zanghi, Alison Sharpe, Lily Hezrony, (middle row L-R) Leah Pacelli, Caitlyn Pacelli, Helena LeCompte, Kevin Avila, Hadleigh Schneider, Angie Bell, Catalina Rivera, Max Letourneau, (front row L-R) Brookelyn Williams, Nyla Hopkins, Charleigh Lyons, Ananya Maddiboina, Breelyn Williams, Lily Rivenburgh, (Sitting L-R) Lianna Bien-Aime, Alexis Brown. All the proceeds from this event will go toward producing next year's show. Tickets can be pre-purchased through our Facebook page and on our website.



Hightstown - Then and Now

Do you follow us on Facebook? If not, you should! It's the best way to keep up with everything "Historical Society" related. One of the running posts on our Facebook page is the Then and Now series. We want to share a few of the past posts here in this newsletter.

Baptist Church - South Main Street

First Baptist Church was built in 1857. On June 12, 1911 the steeple caught fire after being struck by lightning.





Car Dealership - 177 Mercer Street (across from Academy Street)

This dealership became Bagel Shop in the 1960's & 70's, then Old Hights Print Shop. Today it is Stitches-n-Ink. Two doors down was a bowling ally that had pin setters. You would go through the hairdressers to get to the alley.



Hightstown East Windsor Historical Society	Momborshin Annliestion			
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